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Arkansas Aprons:
Food Power and Women in Arkansas, 1857 to 1891

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts in History

by

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Brigham Young University
Bachelor of Science in Zoology, 1999

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This thesis is approved for recommendation to the Graduate Council.

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Abstract

Arkansas foodways in the late nineteenth century were defined by times of plenty and scarcity, need and connection, traditions and innovations. These components created a unique culture in which women through food exchange, were able to improve their standard of living. The years of plenty established in the antebellum era lay in stark contrast to the scarcity during the Civil War. What followed during the Progressive Era are fascinating histories of women employing their agency to empower and improve not only their lives but also future generations. I argue that these women utilized their agency to engage in “food power,” which I define as the capacity or ability a person acquires to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events by participating in food exchange. When a woman acts as an agent in the cultural and economic practice of creating, gifting, or receiving food, she does so to improve her own standard of living and/or to influence the behavior of others or the course of events. This thesis provides evidence in support of my theory of food power.

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Dedication

This is dedicated to my history-loving parents, Buzz and Susan Shahan, and to Greg Spears, my best friend and husband, whose support, enthusiasm, and vigor for life and learning has been this study's consistent catalyst, and to our children, Ryan, Grant, Hannah, William, and Sophie--our hope for the future.

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Introduction

Historians in the new discipline of food studies engage in serious research that provides insight into the social and cultural lives of women and the role that food plays in that world. Historically, women are the central figures working as the primary nurturers in the home and as the key managers of the domestic kitchen. Research into Arkansas records has brought to light new insights about how late nineteenth century Arkansas women worked and networked via food exchange for the benefit of themselves, their families, and their communities.

I feel it an honor and a privilege to share with you the treasures I have found in Arkansas archives. I come from a family of six daughters who have remained very close while spread out across the world. We are all foodies. We were raised to appreciate fine food. My earliest memories include sitting at my father's knee while he fed me. He would say, "Chew your food and enjoy it. Eating is an experience--not only a function of survival."

I come from a strong Latter-day Saint heritage in which food exchange is prevalent at almost every function of The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints such as: Sunday worship, family home evenings, youth group activities, cultural celebrations, and events. For example, following a funeral we always provide the grieving family and friends with a meal afterward. The meal includes a key comfort food we affectionately call "funeral potatoes." It is a delicious concoction with grated potatoes, shredded cheddar cheese, green onions, sour cream and butter. The casserole is topped with buttery corn flakes and baked to perfection.

When I began the graduate program at the University of Arkansas Department of History it was a natural fit for me to be able to research the meanings found in food exchange through the diaries of Arkansas women living in the nineteenth century. I chose to research Arkansas women due to the wealth of local repositories. I selected the nineteenth century because of the ebbs and

flows of food plenty and scarcity during this time period. As I read Arkansas women's diaries the theory of food power materialized right before my eyes. A Book of Mormon prophet named Alma, once wrote to his son Helaman, "By small and simple things are great things brought to pass; and small means in many instances doth confound the wise." Some might consider food exchange insignificant or "small and simple." Some historians might see women's domestic labor as trivial or inconsequential. However, scholarly evidence might convince the strongest skeptic of quite the opposite. The women in Arkansas exercised their power and took action using food, and fortunately, many women recorded their actions in their diaries providing powerful evidence in support of the theory of "food power."

This food power thesis could not have come at a more timely period in modern history. It was during a historiography class in December 2018 when a fellow classmate, historian, and sociologist, Rachel Whitaker, helped me understand the word *power* from a sociologist's point of view. Hence, I came up with the term "food power." For the next several months I researched how food power played a vital role during devastating events such as slavery and the Civil War. Little did I know that I would finish and defend my thesis during one of the most devastating events in modern history: the COVID-19 global pandemic. As hundreds of thousands suffer and perish from the effects of this novel virus, the only way to mitigate the global pandemic has been for families around the world to confine themselves in their homes. Countless global citizens have turned to their kitchens for comfort and empowerment in a time of anxiety and powerlessness. It is my hope that past examples of food power in nineteenth-century Arkansas will strengthen our faith, hope, and charity--providing a healing salve for aching hearts during a time such as this.

Chapter 1: Historiography of Women's Domestic Labor in Food

A dinner table, a rolling pin, an apron, a skillet, a cup of coffee. Such domestic objects evoke feelings of welcome, warmth, and a common understanding. Food can nurture a community toward unity. The lack of food can also divide populations and spark violence between nations. The woman is historically the primary nurturer in the home, the principle player in food labor, and the key manager of the domestic kitchen. Diaries, ex-slave narratives, and other primary records show that nineteenth-century Arkansas women in particular had the ability to control their circumstances--even when resources were scarce--by using their food power. I define food power as the capacity or ability a person acquires to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events by exchanging food. In other words, when a woman acts as an agent in the cultural and economic practice of creating, giving, or receiving food, she does so to improve her own—and her family's—standard of living and/or to influence the behavior of others or the course of events. Food history in Arkansas can be traced with a bottom-up approach by discovering the ways nineteenth-century women performed domestic labor. Domestic labor includes many forms of work: washing, food production and preparation, etc. Within food labor, many Arkansan women utilized their agency through food power. The formula for historic food power is a five-step process:

- 1) An event
- 2) leads to a belief
- 3) which leads to an impression
- 4) which leads to food exchange
- 5) which ends with an outcome.

The historical record is in short supply when it comes to women's labor in food. Historians have had to employ original methodology and create unique definitions in order to provide insights into women's history and food history. Historians Laurel Thatcher Ulrich,

Jeanne Boydston, Stephanie McCurry, and Jennifer Morgan have addressed women's labor in early American history researching broadly diverse avenues. Even the definition of women's labor differs widely among women's history scholars. Some historians, like Jennifer Morgan, define labor as procreative reproduction while others, like Jeanne Boydston, derive a dollar value for domestic labor from scholarly research. These distinct approaches, definitions, and methodologies in regard to scholarship in labor and domesticity offer diverse perspectives about nineteenth-century female domestic labor.¹

Still a relatively young field of study in 1990, the discipline of women's labor history had been largely untapped. While political and intellectual histories dominated the 1960s and 1970s research, some scholars in that era set the stage for study of eighteenth and nineteenth-century lay women. These unknown women largely made the United States of America what it is today. Historian Linda Kerber introduced the concept of Republican Motherhood. She defines Republican Motherhood as an identity that women themselves employed to amalgamate the female domestic sphere with political involvement through the idea that women needed to give moral guidance for their husbands and raise honorable sons to be American citizens. Many women's historians continued to adopt the term Republican Motherhood to describe a nineteenth-century phenomenon that confined women to the household while emphasizing civic duty to influence the public realm of men.²

¹ Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. New York: Vintage Press, 1990; Boydston, Jeanne. *Home & Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990; McCurry, Stephanie. *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995; Morgan, Jennifer. *Laboring Women and Gender: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

² Kerber, Linda. *Women of the Republic: Intellect and Ideology in Revolutionary America*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1980.

Enter Ulrich's 1990 Pulitzer prize-winning book *A Midwife's Tale*. Ulrich's microhistory appears at face value to be confined to only one woman's diary and to only one small geographical area during turn-of-the-nineteenth-century Maine. However, the way in which Ulrich's work demonstrates the powerful influence of one woman on both the public and private spheres shook the ground on which the 1980s women's studies had been founded. Ulrich argues that "the period of Martha's diary, 1785-1812, was an era of profound change...it is not as easy as it once was to dismiss domestic concerns as 'trivia.'" Ulrich's book begins in 1785. The diarist was fifty years old with five children still at home. Ulrich scours all twenty-seven years of the diary--day after day--to uncover the economic and medical impact Ballard had on her society.³ The lack of primary sources for women's labor in the eighteenth century gives even more value to Ballard's diary. Ulrich makes claims and assertions; then supports them with primary and secondary evidence. She also allows the reader to hear Martha's own voice in the text. The midwife's voice supports Ulrich's argument that the women-powered textile community was a driving force in society. Ulrich's sympathetic and admiring language evokes feelings of respect, praise, and appreciation for the dailiness of motherhood. After all, Martha was not only a midwife. By twenty-first-century definitions, she was also a physician, a pharmacist, a wife and mother, and a good neighbor.

These new methodologies provide women's historians with tools to discover the daily lives of women. A void in historical literature likely led Ulrich--and, later, historian Jennifer Morgan--to consider objects like homespun or other creative sources found outside of an archive as meaningful evidence of women's lives. The diaries of Arkansas women and ex-slave

³ Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *A Midwife's Tale: The Life of Martha Ballard, Based on Her Diary, 1785-1812*. P. 27. New York: Vintage Press, 1990.

narratives are some of these unique sources of history in women's domestic labor centering around food.⁴

Historian Jeanne Boydston also took a creative approach to draw out and provide historic context to the dailiness of women's lives. In *Home & Work*, Boydston ambitiously attributes a fixed dollar amount to domestic labor from her scholarly research. She clearly delineates the evolution of the historiography of unpaid women's domestic labor by combining Mary Beth Norton's study of women in the eighteenth century with Ulrich's *Good Wives* to drive home their arguments: while society highly valued colonial women's housework, that appreciation did not translate to higher value outside of the home. Ulrich, in particular, asserts that the difference between colonial women and later women lay in "the forms of social organization which linked economic responsibilities to family responsibilities and which tied each woman's household to the larger world of her village or town." Women's authority did not lay in the act of work itself but where that work was placed within the community's day-to-day interaction. By focusing on the home in her history of women's unpaid domestic labor, Boydston searches to find the objective characteristics and material value of housework as the United States grew from the colonial era toward the industrial revolution. She challenges previous historiography regarding the evolution of this antebellum gender culture and its effect on the perceptions of housework. Boydston limits her location to the Northeastern United States where industrialization first emerged. She asserts that unpaid domestic labor contributed as a central force in the emergence of an industrialized society. Yet, even as antebellum housewives worked tediously, the society surrounding them and even the women themselves undervalued their economic contribution. Boydston includes elite and poor, rural and urban women. The years between the Revolution and

⁴ Morgan, Jennifer. *Laboring Women and Gender: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004.

the War of 1812 propelled New England toward the realization of regional market relations. Surprisingly, the assumption of men's work by acting the "deputy husband" role did not propel women's worker status. Instead, community interest took the forefront. Relying on diaries as a source of primary evidence, Boydston asserts that Republican Motherhood placed child-rearing as a first priority, despite the reality of their lives--the need to both raise children and clean and cook for the rest of the family. Pointing to historian Lisa Norling's claim that "childcare was just one task, no more or less important, among many," Boydston argues that civic republicanism helped to retain women's lower significance as economic agents. A new question could be asked regarding the role of food exchange in women's lives in Arkansas: did food exchange propel Arkansas women into the roles of historic movers and shakers or demote them to culinary servitude?⁵

Five years after Boydston's study of unpaid labor, historian Stephanie McCurry exploded the idea of women's separate spheres in the antebellum South in her work *Masters of Small Worlds*. McCurry offers a Marxist-Feminist approach to class identity. She studies "Old South" yeoman households in a way that centers women as the dominant historical actors with a black majority--who comprised two-thirds of the population--and with an immensely wealthy, powerful planter class. She asserts that the household economy, and not the average farming community, was the sphere that could not be penetrated by the state or the nation. White women also experienced the racialized and gendered privilege over the black population that benefited white men and the patriarchy that accompanied them--which at the same time exemplified

⁵ Boydston, Jeanne. *Home & Work: Housework, Wages and the Ideology of Labor in the Early Republic*. P. 43. New York: Oxford University Press, 1990; Norton, Mary Beth. *Liberty's Daughters: The Revolutionary Experience of American Women, 1750-1800*. Boston: Little, Brown, 1980. Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *Good Wives: Image and Reality in the Lives of Women in Northern New England, 1650-1750*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982; Norling, Lisa. "I Have Ever Felt Homeless: Mariners' Wives and the Ideology of Domesticity." Unpublished paper presented at the Society on the History of the Early American Republic, July 17, 1987.

Thomas Jefferson's ideal republicanism at its heart. McCurry rejects the "natural exclusion of women from political life and political history." The way in which she does this could possibly be seen as an intervention in and of itself. First, she merges the traditionally separated women's public and private spheres. Second, she asserts that women and gender history are more-than-worthy of our historical perusal. She supports this argument by pointedly declaring that women are as relevant to our study as "high" politics and political ideology. This is owing to the fact that the defense of domestic tradition was at the heart of the inception of the Confederacy. This begs the question: did Arkansas women's food exchange challenge or support the Confederacy and the institution of slavery?⁶

Historian Jennifer Morgan argues that relying on numbers alone for historical evidence can perform a certain violence in the study of antebellum African Americans. She claims that a lack of evidence leads to a lack of history which leads to a lack of value. She calls this the "violence of erasure." While archives do tell us some things, they do not tell us everything. She asserts that women are not only valuable for their reproductive possibility in the late-eighteenth and early-nineteenth century, but that they employed certain tools of expression that were not preserved in an archive. An example she offers is the speaking of African languages that survived the Middle Passage. Morgan suggests pushing beyond the "seen" to consider the "unseen." This type of methodology hearkens back to Ulrich's case study in *The Age of Homespun*--presenting the "seen" objects in order to argue the "unseen" complexities of domesticity and labor permeating the antebellum environment. In Arkansan women's diaries, high values are placed on objects such as frying pans, skillets, and heirloom rolling pins. With

⁶ McCurry, Stephanie. *Masters of Small Worlds: Yeoman Households, Gender Relations, and the Political Culture of the Antebellum South Carolina Low Country*. P. ix. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

such a high worth placed on tools of food labor, the evidence may very well suggest a high value should be attributed to women's food labor.⁷

Colonial Arkansas historiography shows that the area experienced rapid and prolonged changes in food labor with the growth of cotton agriculture and slavery, large-scale immigration, and the displacement of Native peoples. Yet, some institutions and traditions--women's status in food production and procreative reproduction, for example--would remain intact from earlier centuries. Before 1541, there was no written record giving voice to Native Americans of Arkansas: the Quapaw, Osage, and Caddos tribes. Instead, historians look to archeology and later European records as primary sources of evidence. The evidence shows that Quapaw and Osages had common cultural origins. However, the Caddos are more distinct. Regardless of these differences, women in these Native American societies held enormous power. They were forces in diplomacy, spirituality, and food exchange. Archeologist George Sabo III outlines clearly in his work *Paths of Our Children* the roles of Native American women and food in Arkansas. Caddos women produced, cultivated, and prepared food. They also maintained respectful relationships with the spiritual world through rituals in agriculture. Sabo writes, "A planting ceremony honored the women as they began their work in the fields--activities that were considered sacred among the Caddos." Although Sabo concedes that much is still unclear regarding the Caddos social organizations, early European accounts suggest that "each household consisted of several families related through the female line." (49) While each matrilineally organized household maintained self-reliant food supplies, the community would come together

⁷ Morgan, Jennifer. *Laboring Women and Gender: Reproduction and Gender in New World Slavery*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2004; Morgan, Jennifer. "Women in the Middle Passage: Gender, Slavery, and the Problem of Writing History." Bakersfield College. *YouTube*, YouTube, 6 Mar. 2017, www.youtube.com/watch?v=_i8X0NPg5vk; Ulrich, Laurel Thatcher. *Age of Homespun: Objects and Stories in the Creation of an American Myth*. New York: Vintage Books, 2001.

for meals, taking the time to cook. Women roasted green corn ears, parched seeds, nuts, and some roots on hot coals, then ground them into flour. Bear oil served as the primary source of fat, mixed with this flour to create a cold or boiled gruel. Squash, beans, and pieces of meat rounded out the meal to serve a heartier stew. Caddos who lived near salt marshes also made salt by “boiling the briny water in large, shallow clay pans.” (51, 52) Food also played a major role in Caddo funeral ceremonies. In order to help a soul along its journey, the Caddos placed food offerings on the grave of the deceased and replenished the traveler’s supply for several days. Clearly, women’s role in the Caddo society was increased due to their unique employment of food power.⁸

Sabo asserts that like the Caddos, the Quapaw tribe also highly valued women due to their roles in food production, cultivation, and preparation. Quapaw women maintained control of gardening and the entire society sanctified women in rituals. After the Quapaw hunted, it was the women who butchered the captured prey and prepared the hides, gathered wood and wild foods, cooked food, cared for the children, and performed household chores all in addition to acting as the agriculturalists. The agricultural cycle was marked by a series of important rituals, some of which served to honor and sanctify the activities performed by women. Quapaw women were also proficient in pottery making and would use the pottery in both food preparation and consumption along with spiritual rituals as well. Food power resonated in the actions of these Quapaw women. By 1833, signed treaties would divide the Quapaws and cause them to lose their aboriginal homelands. The loss of both the land and a loss of population from starvation and disease resulted in a loss of food power. However, this loss of food power did not begin in

⁸ Sabo, George. *Paths of Our Children: Historic Indians of Arkansas*. P. 49, 51, 52. Fayetteville: Arkansas Archaeological Survey, 2001.

1833. In 1541, Spanish soldiers fed themselves by confiscating food--corn and beans--from the Native communities.

Unlike the Caddos and the Quapaws, Osage women enjoyed the responsibility of gathering and gardening well-maintained self-reliant plots. The Osage culture placed the men's hunt in greater importance than the women's agricultural influence. Still, food power resonates in the women's training of the next generation to nurture the community through food exchange. Mothers taught daughters how to tend crops and handle domestic affairs. As a skilled hunting community, the Osages would ultimately drive out the Caddos and kill the Quapaws. A fourth tribe worth mentioning, the Chickasaw, resided in Mississippi with the British and would come into play later in the nineteenth century.⁹

Historian Sonia Toudji reinforces Sabo's argument that Osage and Quapaw "women cultivated and cooked corn, beans, squash, and from the forest, they gathered nuts, fruits, seeds, and roots...[women] controlled the food they produced." She cites Garrick A. Bailey's *The Osage and the Invisible World*. Bailey details the power and symbolism of the traditions passed on from older women to younger women concerning sacred food and the powers found therein. Toudji asserts that the Native American women during this early period "were a labor force for their communities that sustained economic exchange with the Europeans." Toudji also gives an example of a European woman with enormous food power. The widow Ménard was the largest slave owner at the post with thirty-seven slaves. She worked as a merchant and farmer and "became one of the most productive farmers growing wheat, corn, and tobacco" according to records from the 1790s. As Arkansas became an American territory surrounded by other American territories, diplomacy no longer needed to be practiced between the Europeans and

⁹ Sabo, George. *Paths of Our Children: Historic Indians of Arkansas*. P. 49, 51, 52. Fayetteville: Arkansas Archaeological Survey, 2001.

Native Americans. Long-standing powerful roles played by Native American women with food power disintegrated as Americans drew boundaries.¹⁰

Much of the written record begins with the Arkansas Post, located at shifting spots in the delta. French fur hunters and traders working in Arkansas brought no family—women or children—with them. This pattern created a wildly imbalanced ratio of men to women with substantially more European men than women. As single males residing in this frontier terrain for an extended period of time, they were more likely to seek companionship from Native women. French fur traders worked with and enjoyed the society of the local Native American tribes. Historian Morris Arnold focuses on the early Arkansas Post by studying the early French and Spanish settlers. It is from early writings of these literate, European settlers we discover that while very few African Americans—less than 100—lived in colonial Arkansas from 1686 to 1804, Arnold does make mention of the well-known Arkansas African American innkeeper at the Arkansas Post, Marie Jeanne. Arnold writes, “lawyers and judges who rode circuit were loud in their praise of Mary John’s culinary skills and the comfort of her hostelry.” This powerful example follows another of the white First Lady of the Post whose duty it was to see that she had the best table in town. A fierce debate currently rages between Arnold and historian Kathleen DuVal. Arnold maintains there existed more agency among Native American women in their marriages to European men. Meanwhile, DuVal argues that women were more a commodity and purchased as slaves by the French hunters. We know of these intermarriages from the scattered baptism records of the children of white men with Native women. However, the children are not identified. The sparse records do not show many Quapaw women in such relationships. While

¹⁰ Bailey, Garrick. A. *The Osage and the Invisible World: From the Works of Francis La Flesche*. Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1999. Edwards, Gary T. and Cherisse Jones-Branch. *Arkansas Women: Their Lives and Times*. University of Georgia Press, 2018. (Chapter Title: “Women in Early Frontier Arkansas: They Did All the Work except Hunting.” Chapter Author: Sonia Toudji)

there is evidence of the Quapaws and the French intermarrying, it seems more an extension of cooperative relationships that are mutually advantageous as allies in war. Also, the French, new to the environment, did not have the tools or methods to feed themselves. The Native Americans took this opportunity to both lend and gain support. The Europeans traded alcohol and gunpowder in exchange for food and tools for survival. Intermarriages were a product of the cooperative relationship. DuVal asserts that Quapaws valued their women's roles in society too much to marry them off to Europeans. She argues that it is more likely the Native American women marrying the European men are bought or stolen from Western tribes. The fact that Arnold concedes that many Native American women were not local--but brought via the slave trade as concubine--lends more strength to DuVal's argument.¹¹

Thanks to early records of Spanish soldiers, we know what the early colonial settlers ate. Native cuisine consisted of bear oil as a medium for vegetables to be mixed in as stews. Quapaws were a large supplier of venison, buffalo, bison, and corn. The Europeans imported alcohol, gunpowder, and manufactured goods while bear oil, bison meat, and deer skins were exported. Europeans would introduce hogs to the region, which would quickly become a staple of the Arkansas diet.¹²

Native women did a larger share of agricultural labor than nineteenth-century women of European or African origins. Nineteenth century women—both white and black—would share common roles in food exchange and procreative reproduction. While both eighteenth-century and nineteenth-century Arkansas women shared commonalities like domestic labor and

¹¹ Arnold, Morris. *Colonial Arkansas, 1686-1804: A Social and Cultural History*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1991; Arnold, Morris. "Colonial Arkansas Women." *Arkansas Historical Quarterly* Vol. 76, No. 1 (Spring 2017): p. 1-22; Whayne, Jeannie. *Arkansas: A Narrative History*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002; DuVal, Kathleen. "Indian Intermarriage and Métissage in Colonial Louisiana." *William & Mary Quarterly*. Vol. 65, No. 2 (April 2008): p. 267-304.

¹² Sabo, George. *Paths of Our Children: Historic Indians of Arkansas*. P. 49, 51, 52. Fayetteville: Arkansas Archaeological Survey, 2001.

procreative reproduction, there are also differences between the women of each era. Eighteenth-century Native American women played a vital role in diplomacy, food exchange, being at the center of rituals that forged or maintained relationships between Native tribes, French hunters, and European settlers of the colonial era. However, by the mid-nineteenth century Arkansas was surrounded by other states of the U.S. diminishing the need for diplomacy among sovereign people. Another difference can be found in the significance of women's roles in food exchange in each era. While eighteenth-century Native American women's food contributions resulted in a spiritually sanctified role and matriarchal cultural power, in the patriarchal societies of nineteenth-century white and African American women, food power pales in significance. Nonetheless, the historiography of antebellum Arkansas offers persuasive evidence of food power, even if lesser, among white and African American women. Multiple primary and secondary sources in Arkansas history argue in support of the theory of food power. Arnold advises that lumping all women in colonial Arkansas into one group and calling it a concise "women's experience" would be disingenuous. Women's experiences in this era were as different as men's experiences in this era. One common bond that might unite these women, young and old, enslaved or free, elite or humble, is the recognition of food power. Historians might investigate whether these women gained *agency* through cooking skills and food exchange.

The Arkansas territory straddled civilization to the East and the American frontier to the West—a frontier in which women were scarce. This scarcity of women in the West drove up the value of women's domestic labor in food. While men dominated the mining, farming, and fur trade industries, they craved a woman's touch in the kitchen. Scholars have argued that Western women were more liberated than their Eastern counterparts by getting out of their corsets and

standing on the front porch with the rifle in hand to defend the family's fortress they sacrificed so much for and worked so hard to create. Several Western historians have explored the realities of food history in the West. In 1958, historian Dee Brown published *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West*. His work is largely considered one of the first to fill in the historiographical gap of women's perspectives in the West. Unfortunately, it followed a Turnerian trend by focusing on white women, excluding Mexican-American, African-American, Asian-American, and Euro-American women.¹³

Historian Reginald Horsman asserts in *Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion* that in addition to a wide assortment of opportunities found in the American frontier in the mid-1800s, there was also a fecund, overflowing wealth of food and drink. Europeans were surprised at the Americanized diets created by turning to wild honey in place of sugar and drinking more coffee than soup. Horsman also spends the first pages of his introduction expounding on the variety of game, fish, and crops in areas of fertile soil and a plenitude of wildlife. Horsman argues that after ample wildlife, came a fertile array of domestic livestock. He argues that *where* you lived and *who* you encountered while there, often altered your diet. For example, fruitful Ohio and Kentucky communities ate vastly different than the arid, Spanish-influenced Southwestern regions. He even goes so far as offering the cannibalism of the ill-fated Donner Party as an example of a group responding to the harsh environment of the Sierra Nevadas. Horsman credits knowledgeable Indian natives with the survival of Lewis and Clark and with the success through know-how of the American West pioneers. Part social history, part environmental history, Horsman explores pork and corn in the forests and prairie, the discovery of tortillas and frioles on the Overland Trails, the culture and diets among the

¹³ Brown, Dee. *The Gentle Tamers: Women of the Old Wild West*. Lincoln, NE : University of Nebraska Press, 1981, ©1958.

army and their wives, and the legendary chuck wagon. It would be hard *not* to include women in a work focused on food. Horsman relies heavily on evidence found in women's diaries and cookbooks such as Amelia Simmons' *The First American Cookbook: A Facsimile of "American Cookery,"* 1796, Rebecca Burlend's *A True Picture of Emigration: or Fourteen Years in the Interior of North America,* 1848, "Diary of Kitturah Penton Belknap" and Sarah Welch Nossaman and Mary Nossaman Todd's "Pioneering at Bonaparte and near Pella" from Glenda Riley's 1996 *Prairie Voices: Iowa's Pioneering Women*. In *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren, 1853-1855*, Horsman hearkens back to Turner's crucible of the frontier when he writes about the immigrant Norwegian Koren family, "The Korens did not go hungry, but they found that typical Norwegian food had been much modified by pioneer conditions in the interior of North America...[However], by the fall of 1855, when the church trustees ate at the parsonage, Mrs. Koren was able to serve a meal of 'roast pork, of course, corn on the cob, pancakes, pickles, cucumbers, and sour milk soup.' The process of transforming a Norwegian into an American diet was well underway." Along with compelling details emerging from the dailiness of these pioneers's lives, Horsman also includes useful information about historical culinary terminology. For example, the historical "peck" of flour or butter translates to the modern eight quarts of a dry ingredient like flour or two gallons of a wet ingredient. He organizes frontier societies by the most powerful and fundamental frontier unit: the family. This provides an inclusive and anti-Turnerian perspective by providing the reader with an image that includes both women and children working the land and preparing the food and not only men.¹⁴

¹⁴ Horsman, Reginald. *Feast or Famine: Food and Drink in American Westward Expansion*. Colombia: University of Missouri Press, 2008; Simmons, Amelia & Wilson, Mary Tolford. *The First American Cookbook: a Facsimile of "American Cookery,"* 1796. New York : Dover Publications, 1984, ©1958; Burlend, Rebecca & Burlend, Edward. *A true picture of emigration: or fourteen years in the interior of North America*. London : G. Berger, 1848; Belknap, Kitturah Penton. *Diary, 1839-1848*. Manuscript. Washington State University. Pullman, WA; Nossaman, Sarah Welch & Harlan, Edgar. "Pioneering at Bonaparte and Near Pella." *The Annals of Iowa*, v13 n6 (192210): 443-453; Riley, Glenda. *Prairie Voices: Iowa's Pioneering Women*. Ames: Iowa State University Press, 1996; Koren,

Before historian Joseph Conlin's groundbreaking work *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines: Food and Foodways on the Western Mining Frontier* the field of food history still remained in its infancy. Conlin argues that food in the West was more fecund than previously imagined. He uses sources written by women to propel his assertions. The era's leading cookbook was written by Eliza Leslie. Leslie empowered the cooks of the day with luxurious instructions for seafood. Conlin writes, "[Leslie] thought nothing of calling for three lobsters in the preparation of a sauce. Another of her recipes begins: 'Take two hundred fat oysters.' These measurements seem extravagant fare for today's palate, but Conlin argues they might have been more common than we realize in these industrious years. Conlin articulates well the enjoyment the travelers of 1849 found in foodstuffs given to the weary prospectors from home. The womenfolk participated in "putting up such preserves, pickles and other delicacies as could be kept to become most acceptable when afterwards compelled to partake of cold meals." Men made clear how much they enjoyed a "supply of excellent preserves and rich fruitcake." No doubt, the left-behind women and even the few that made the trek felt empowered when contributing such delights to the company. While the polygamist Mormons endured quite a bad wrap from the government and popular literature, Conlin references Dale Morgan's surprising discovery that only one of eight emigrants spoke ill of the religious colonists. What accounts for such a positive impression? The exchange of food from the Mormons to the emigrants. Traveler Charles Ferguson wrote of his time in Salt Lake City, "They invariably asked us to eat and would hardly take no for an answer." Conlin asserts that when "overlanders began to arrive, milk, cheese, and butter were abundant, as well as every common garden vegetable except potatoes."¹⁵

Elisabeth & Nelson, David Theodore. *The Diary of Elisabeth Koren, 1853-1855*. Decorah, Iowa: Vesterheim Norwegian-American Museum, 2006, 1955.

¹⁵ Conlin, Joseph R. *Bacon, Beans, and Galantines: Food and Foodways on the Western Mining Frontier*. P. 15. Reno: University of Nevada Press, 1986.

While Conlin focuses more on food than on women, historian Glenda Riley adds a female dimension to Western historiography in food history. In *The Female Frontier* Riley argues that the value of food in women's domestic labor in food cannot be understated, "It was clear to [nineteenth-century women] that home, marriage, and children were the focal point of women's lives." In her chapter "Home and Hearth on the Prairie," Riley argues that "of all the items that women manufactured, foodstuffs required the most attention." A lack of *food power* could be extrapolated from an 1856 letter from Iowan Mary Ellis to her dear mother, "We don't have anything but 'taters' and punkin here." Inspiring future historians like Horsman, Riley describes an array of delicate cuisine that she says "would tax the ability of a modern cook. Her bill of fare, as she called it, was elegant and extensive: 'Firstly, for bread, nice light rolls; cake, doughnuts; for pie, pumpkin; preserves, crab apples and wild plums; sauce, dried apples; meat first round; roast spare ribs with sausage and mashed potatoes and plain gravy.'" Such a cornucopia on an early 1840s Christmas table must have afforded food power to all in attendance.¹⁶

Sandra Myres's impressive study, *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915* describes the anticipation the women felt "to set at a table and eat like folks." This can be interpreted as women regaining food power that felt lost on the pioneer trek. The ideas of creating a settled home and ending her "gypsy" existence attracted many a homemaker to dig in and create a sense of stability for her family. True to Turner's frontier crucible, the pioneer woman adapted to the demands of her new life. Myres explains that while men ingeniously created new innovations to farm new crops, homemakers toiled creatively to transform new domestic techniques to advance their visions of security and safety in an often-hostile new world.

¹⁶ Riley, Glenda. *The Female Frontier: A Comparative View of Women on the Prairie and the Plains*. Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 1988.

These women would employ the same ingenuity they found in themselves on the overland trail to create a fortress of safety for their families.¹⁷

The intersection of the historiography of African American history, food history, and women's history can be found in a variety of recent research. Historians were ignorant to the truths of slavery before the 1930s. As the Depression spread, New Deal programs grew to include previously overlooked workers to provide relief in the form of government employment. One such group comprised artists and writers. The 1935 Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project responded boldly by employing writers to interview as many former slaves as possible in order to record such a unique generation of witnesses. America's understanding of slavery would transform as crucial evidence surrounding agricultural practices, slave life, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and oral history itself would undergo serious revisions. Arkansas historians owe a great debt to folklorist George E. Lankford. Beginning in 1977, he painstakingly took apart collection after collection of slave narratives to whittle down the plethora of resources to focus narrowly on Arkansan slave communities. From this arduous task, he edited *Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery*. It is from this precious volume the reader is able to hear the valuable voice of the enslaved Arkansan. One ex-slave recollects how his own grandmother carried contraband food in her apron from a plantation home kitchen to a cabin that imprisoned hungry slave children. Another ex-slave details a serendipitous group of women who carried sandwiches, coffee, and motivating cheers to beleaguered Union troops during a pause in battle.¹⁸

¹⁷ Myres, Sandra. *Westering Women and the Frontier Experience, 1800-1915*. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1982.

¹⁸ Lankford, George E. *Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery Narratives from the 1930s WPA*, pp. 50, 56-57, 190-194. Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 2003.

Culinary historian Michael W. Twitty's *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South* presents an innovative view on race in his enlightening memoir of Southern cuisine and food culture that traces his family history—both black and white—through food, from Africa to America and from slavery to freedom. Southern cuisine is inherent to the American culinary tradition. In this distinctive memoir, Twitty traces his roots and the inflammatory politics regarding the origins of soul food, barbecue, and all Southern cooking. From colonial tobacco and rice farms to antebellum plantation kitchens and backbreaking cotton fields, Twitty recounts his heritage through the foods that enabled his ancestors' survival. He researches stories, recipes, genetic tests, and historical documents, while traveling from Civil War battlefields in Virginia to synagogues in Alabama to Black-owned organic farms in Georgia. Twitty asserts that racial healing may come from accepting the pangs of the Southern past. He argues that truth is more than skin deep and that there is power in how food can bring the progeny of the enslaved and the progeny of their former slaveholders together to the kitchen table. Twitty's stream-of-consciousness narrative supports the theory of food power among enslaved populations. He begins, "The Old South is where I cook. The Old South is a place where food tells me where I am. The Old South is a place where food tells me who I am. The Old South is where food tells me where we have been. The Old South is where the story of our food might just tell America where it's going." Twitty seeks to demonstrate the history of black identity via food exchange. Twitty's work shows the enduring nature of food power not only in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries but also among African American families today.¹⁹

¹⁹ Twitty, Michael W. *The Cooking Gene: A Journey through African American Culinary History in the Old South*. New York: Amistad, 2017.

Archeologist Anne Yentsch Armstrong has also uncovered valuable food and slave historical insights. She writes, “Archaeology at slave quarter sites yields evidence of substandard rations supporting the documentary record and its accounts of the dismal situation. The Georgia and South Carolina rice coast is an example. Once a week, Sea Island planters supplied either a peck of corn or a bushel of sweet potatoes. Once a month they handed out a quart of salt. As one observer wrote, “When the hardest work was required, [slaves] received a little molasses and salt meat.” It took tenacity to survive; it took looking out for one’s interests. Throughout slavery, anyone who built a workable food procurement strategy rarely went hungry and had a choice of food. One expert observed that the slaves “had achieved a kind of independence.” Armstrong’s assertion that using food exchange as a means of achieving independence from enslavers supports the argument of food power. Slaves craved creating their own identity in a world that perpetually stripped them of any sense of self. Food power provided them a means by which they were able to explore their collective individualism.²⁰

Journalist Karen Pinchin’s extensive investigative research into African Americans who seek their culinary heritage has produced more than a few potential research questions into the fields of slave history and food history. She highlights the trends that contemporary African Americans are seeing in the parallels between dishes found in both Southern cuisine and modern African cuisine: okra in stews and red peas with rice. Pinchin references culinary historian Jessica Harris who sees a similar parallel in Louisiana gumbo and a Senegalese slave stew called soupikandia—also thickened with okra—that was produced for both slaves and slaveowners. Harris’s research focuses on bringing to light silenced slave voices. She says, “Black people have

²⁰ Armstrong, Anne Yentsch. “Excavating the South’s African American Food History.” *African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter* Vol. 11, Issue 2 (June 2008): Article 2.

been in the room, but for so long they were so good at being invisible." Pinchin also references Dave Shields, a food historian and professor at the University of South Carolina in Columbia. Shields has researched slave archives to bring to light forgotten slave chefs. One prominent slave—that the world might not have heard about had Shields not mined articles and records searching for the forgotten slave voice—is Emmeline Jones. Beginning as a slave, Jones magnified her culinary skills to create multi-dish menus that eventually led her to cook in New York clubs in the late 1870s for the likes of Presidents Garfield, Arthur, and Cleveland. Clearly, Jones found and took hold of her own food power. Scholar Alicia Cromwell is “studying the silences”—a term coined by Harris—which means she must find creative means to shine light on an entire population that did not write diaries or letters. Cromwell scoured legislative records, tax rolls, newspaper clippings, and other primary sources. While other researchers have read the same sources countless times before, Cromwell revealed female Muslim Nigerian slaves who worked as fruit sellers and market vendors on behalf of their owners. Cromwell argues that these women aided in creating a foundation for the overall economic structure of the South. How did these enslaved women do this? Long-distance price fixing and aggressive sales techniques. Cromwell says, "I'm trying to teach my students, black and white, a different kind of history about slavery. If we want to understand current relationships, then we need to go back to these very uncomfortable pasts and explore how Africans actually contributed to American culture." Cromwell's sentiments about focusing on “these very uncomfortable pasts” echoes Twitty's similar assertion that we need to look at our painful slave history to begin our modern healing.²¹

²¹ Pinchin, Karen. “How Slavery and African Food Traditions Shaped American Cooking.” *NationalGeographic.com*. 1 Mar 2014. Online magazine. <https://www.nationalgeographic.com/news/2014/3/140301-african-american-food-history-slavery-south-cuisine-chefs/>: accessed 2019.

Historian Donald P. McNeilly argues in *The Old South Frontier* that moderately wealthy Arkansas planters and their sons immigrated to the then vacant lands of the fertile Mississippi River with the express purpose to seek fortune and to establish themselves as the new leaders of the nascent frontier's planter aristocracy. Harkening back to Frederick Jackson Turner's frontier thesis, McNeilly articulates the pattern each family underwent in the construction of the new "slaveocracy:" acquire the choicest land possible, clear it, plant a new crop, and build rustic homes and other buildings. Frontier life proved trying for both white families and the relocated slaves who labored to create a successful harvest. McNeilly asserts that by 1836—Arkansas's statehood—these newcomers had fixed their hold on this "new" land. He further argues that this secure attachment to the land solidified in the later antebellum and Civil War periods.

McNeilly's chapter five, "Slavery on the Cotton Frontier," goes into depth about slave family life. One example of food power can be found in the act of slave mothers hunting to supplement their family's diet. McNeilly draws extensively on the Arkansas slave narratives to defend his argument. "Israel Johnson recalled his mother's efforts to supplement...with possum, an errand of hunting strictly forbidden by the master. When the master caught her with the illicit quarry, he confiscated the opossum. Undaunted, she continued her nightly hunts, now burying the quarry until it was safe to prepare." Johnson's mother took the initiative to use food to empower not only herself, but her family and community.²²

The Civil War was the most disruptive and catastrophic event in Arkansas history. Historian Carl H. Moneyhon argues in *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin* that secession and war also brought far-reaching

²² McNeilly, Donald P. *The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000.

changes to Arkansas households. The antebellum financial system manifested an inability to sustain the war effort while simultaneously providing for the civilian community. The military grappled with civilians and civilians sparred with one another for supplies. These disputes weakened the bonds and ideology that had given meaning to antebellum white society. The fights also resulted in an attack on private property--which included the ownership of slaves. Change achieved behind Confederate lines, however, only insinuated the extent of adjustment in areas where battles occurred or that were garrisoned by Union forces. In order to survive, families were forced to flee the Missouri-Arkansas border. This disruption caused men to join partisan forces. Historian Daniel Sutherland argues that these partisans constituted some of the most disruptive and violent engagements in Arkansas in the Civil War. Women also engaged in guerrilla warfare. In 1864, a successful operation to transport purloined cotton from Little Rock to Benton included wagons driven by several staunch Confederate women. With fathers and sons gone to war, women gained increased independence and powerful dominance in a previously patriarchal society. By taking on roles previously assumed by men, women changed the traditional roles of Arkansas society. Women farmed, traded, and protected the home in addition to continuing their more traditional domestic labor. Older men, too aged to contribute to the war effort, were left dependent on women and slaves for food. It was the women and the enslaved that kept the society knit together while the men were away. The women were the providers and protectors in the household. These new-found responsibilities were referenced more than once in wartime letters to family members. The new reliance on slaves, however, was not referenced.²³

The current historiography of women's labor and domesticity places greater emphasis and demand for future scholarship in this ambitious field. Serious discipline and study in this

²³ Moneyhon, Carl H. *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994.

specific realm seems more timely than ever as both men and women continue to place greater value on family and home. This pendulum shift in society may also perpetuate a more prolific bottom-up approach that will bless labor and social historical research to come.

Chapter 2: Advantageous Aprons in the Civil War, 1861-1865

Arkansas's history is rife with contrast: rich and poor, young and old, black and white, bond and free, native and migrant, male and female. While Native American tribes were driven out of Arkansas by the 1830s, it was around this same decade that large populations of African American slaves began their forced migration via the slave trade into the newly formed state. What are the commonalities and differences among Arkansas women from 1850-1900 and their relation to the exchange of food? In the domestic sphere at the dinner table? The public sphere as a commodity for economic exchange? Are the desires to nurture or to protect motivating factors for these women? What about enslaved women?

While exported products of the hunt reigned during the eighteenth-century, self-sufficient agriculture in the nineteenth century turned toward market agriculture. With money-making King Cotton, more and more slaves were forcibly transported into the state to contribute to the fecund global trade. In the Delta specifically, slavery and cotton loomed large. As grain production increased in states such as Virginia and Kentucky, the need for slave labor decreased, and tens of thousands of slaves were exposed to cotton-growing areas further South. A population explosion occurred. Antebellum Arkansas has what has been called a “dual economy”—self-sufficient agriculture, often localized trade in Northwest Arkansas and participation in the globalized market of the Southeast. We might ask whether women in these different economies shared commonalities or whether their experiences differed dramatically in the two regions.²⁴ More and more white and black families moved to Arkansas to grow cotton in the delta. In these early decades, new arrivals discovered that while the northwest Arkansas highlands were healthier, the delta proved very fertile...and very malarial. By the 1850s, the cotton-booming delta thrived.

²⁴ Conversation with historian Dr. Patrick Williams, PhD. October 31, 2019.

These different forms of agriculture affected women's agency with food. In contrast to the Caddo and Quapaw Native American tribes of the early 1800s in which all of agricultural labor was attributed to women, mid-nineteenth century white and black agricultural labor was shared by both men and women. However, women were still vital actors in food preparation.

While much of Arkansas's food history remains to be written, it appears to be an uphill battle to change the historical narrative from negative to positive. Early travelers' accounts gave Arkansas a bad culinary reputation. The voyagers complained of repeated fare consisting of cornbread and salt pork. These limited menus came as a result of a bountiful supply of corn and hogs in the antebellum era. The 1800s diet remained unvaried. This lack of variety in food preparation was noted in the travel diaries of scientific gentlemen from the North: Thomas Nuttall and Henry Schoolcraft in 1819 and, later, George Featherstonhaugh in the 1830s. After they published their food complaints, Arkansas's poor culinary reputation is known to have reached as far as London. These winter visitors only consumed cornbread and greasy pork, meal after meal; which makes the reader wonder if their culinary reports might have been improved had they enjoyed a spring visit with a garden variety. It would not be until 1854 that a positive review would be published, and alas, only in German by immigrant Friedrich Gerstaecker.²⁵

While the men and women of European origin largely visited Arkansas of their own free will, the majority of African American men and women arrived in chains, with many separated from their families.

²⁵ Nuttall, Thomas. *A Journal of Travels into the Arkansas Territory during the Year 1819, with Occasional Observations on the Manners of the Aborigines: Illustrated by a Map and Other Engravings*. Philadelphia: T. H. Palmer, 1821; Schoolcraft, Henry. *Journal of a Tour into the Interior of Missouri and Arkansas: from Potosi, or Mine a Burton, in Missouri Territory, in a south-west direction, toward the Rocky Mountains: performed in the years 1818 and 1819*. London: Printed for Sir. R. Phillips and Co., 1821. (Reprinted as *Rude Pursuits and Rugged Peaks: Schoolcraft's Ozark Journal 1818-1819*, ed, Milton Rafferty (U of A Press, 1996).); Featherstonhaugh, George. *Excursion through the Slave States: from Washington on the Potomac, to the frontier of Mexico*. London: J. Murray, 1844; Gerstaecker, Friedrich. *Wild Sports in the Far West: the Narrative of a German Wanderer Beyond the Mississippi, 1837-1843*. Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1968. Original printing: 1854.

Nineteenth-century enslaved African Americans in Arkansas pursued freedom in various ways. Ultimately, emancipation would arrive in different ways. At times it came through quiet resistance and at other times it came through open and violent rebellion. Food power allowed enslaved African American women in Arkansas to achieve a desired outcome by acting as agents in the cultural and economical practices of creating, giving, and receiving food. One example of food power during the antebellum era comes from WPA interviewer Samuel Shinkle Taylor, a well-known African American reporter in Little Rock. Taylor drew from the 1930s WPA interviews. Judging from the text of the following slave narrative recorded by Taylor, the reader may assume that the former slave felt comfortable sharing his history with a member of his own race. Augustus Robinson, age seventy-eight, begins,

I was born in Calhoun county Arkansas in 1860... My grandmother on my mother's side said when I was a little fellow she was a cook and that she would bring stuff up to the cabin where the little n-----s were locked up and feed them through the crack. She would hide it underneath her apron. She wasn't supposed to do it. All the little n-----s were kept in one house when the old folks were working in the field. There were six or seven of us.

This grandmother likely felt powerless knowing that her beloved grandchildren were locked in a cabin without food. This brave woman saw and felt the need to nurture her grandchildren. How did she address this need? Food exchange. By carrying contraband food from the enslaver's kitchen to the cabin full of children, she exercised agency by practicing food power. Her choice likely saved lives and changed the course of events.²⁶

- 1) An event occurred: Grandmother worked as an enslaved cook;
- 2) which lead to a belief: she believed she had the ability to help her captive grandchildren;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: Grandmother hid food in her apron;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: Grandmother carried food to the hungry children locked in a cabin;

²⁶ Lankford, George E. *Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery Narratives from the 1930s WPA*, pp. 50, 56-57, 190-194. Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 2003.

- 5) which, lastly, presented a desirable outcome: grandchildren were nourished and survived to tell the story of this brave woman.

Devastating and catastrophic historic events drive ingenuity and progress. This trend, along with evidence of food power, is common among primary sources from the antebellum era in Arkansas. After this era, the tragedy of the Civil War brought with it a sharp increase in the number of original, primary records that provide evidence in support of the theory of food power. Ironically, the antebellum era—an age of growing productivity in Arkansas—only provides scant examples of the historic phenomenon called food power.

Food played a central role during the Civil War in Arkansas. Both Union and Confederate militaries used food supplies to shape their conduct. Arkansas women, whose military roles were severely limited, performed small and simple tasks using food as a tool for achieving their desired wartime outcomes. Some historians might consider a woman's role as a domestic laborer in food an insignificant contribution to the war on either side. However, primary evidence proves that it was exactly countless small acts achieved by these everyday unsung heroines that swayed the balance of the war in favor of the Union in Confederate Arkansas. Arkansas women exercised their wartime agency to enact *food power*. I define food power as the capacity or ability to direct or influence the behavior of others or the course of events by preparing, producing, and exchanging food. In other words, when an individual had a need, he or she used food as a tool to fulfill that need.

The Civil War was the single most disruptive and catastrophic event in the history of the state of Arkansas. Food was a central player in the battle against this disruption. The rampant devastation of the Civil War pitted civilian survival against military necessity. Historian Carl H. Moneyhon asserts in *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas* that secession

and war also brought far-reaching changes to Arkansas households.²⁷ The antebellum financial system of the Southern states manifested an inability to sustain the war effort while simultaneously providing for the civilian community. The military grappled with civilians and civilians sparred with one another for supplies. Confederate as well as Union disputes weakened the bonds and ideology that had given meaning to antebellum white society. The competition for supplies also resulted in an attack on private property—which included the ownership of slaves.

Skirmishes over food raged in the Ozarks. The weakening of campaign supply lines to both Federal and Confederate armies in Northwest Arkansas required soldiers to forage and to seize gristmills.²⁸ Gristmills performed more labor than grinding flour, corn, and rye. They also served as factories throughout Washington County and Ozark villages. These factories employed Arkansans, fed the community, and served as social venues. The clash between the Union and the Confederacy—both needing valuable food supplies for civilians and soldiers—created a struggle for power on a large scale. If a group controlled a gristmill then it gained the power to feed its army. Both sides' troops also directly seized food, forage, and livestock from civilians to sustain the armies. The Union's post commander in Fayetteville knew this about this advantage. In the summer of 1864, Colonel Marcus LaRue Harrison wrote, "The disabling of mills causes more writhing among bushwhackers than any other mode of attack." Harrison then proceeded to destroy gristmills owned by Confederate sympathizers in Benton and Washington counties. The result was a devastating \$45,000 decrease in productivity in Northwest Arkansas. This power struggle over gristmills could be seen as a power play between armies.

²⁷ Moneyhon, Carl H. *The Impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction on Arkansas: Persistence in the Midst of Ruin*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1994. P. 123

²⁸ Michael H. Hughes. "Wartime Gristmill Destruction in Northwest Arkansas and Military-Farm Colonies." *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 46, No. 2 (Summer, 1987), pp. 167-186.

While militaries on both sides fought for food supplies, citizens battled starvation. In order to survive, families were forced to flee the Ozarks. This disruption caused men to join partisan forces. Historian Daniel Sutherland argues that these partisans were responsible for some of the most disruptive and violent engagements in Arkansas in the Civil War.²⁹ Women also engaged in guerrilla warfare. In 1864, a successful operation to transport purloined cotton from Little Rock to Benton included wagons driven by several staunch Confederate women.

Families fought for survival by migrating to where they could find food to feed their destitute children. Displacement after displacement caused a mass exodus from the Ozark highlands into Missouri. Refugee families from Northwest Arkansas moved with those in Southwest Missouri to Springfield. Ultimately, Rolla, Missouri became a saving mecca for the weary and wartorn civilians. Private charities initiated the Rolla rescue. After those means were exhausted, the federal army turned to civilian humanitarian relief. Food was the most important form of relief necessary for these destitute families. Naturally, refugees would turn to whichever military posts had the most supplies. The burden of these starving civilians placed on the army suggests that the destruction of farms, gristmills, and cattle herds created more of a setback than a military advantage, since the ensuing starvation permeated army lines as well.³⁰

Circumstances of the war extended women's authority beyond the traditional wielding of domestic labor in food. With fathers and sons gone to war, women gained increased independence and powerful dominance in a previously patriarchal society. By taking on roles previously assumed by men, women temporarily changed the traditional gender roles of

²⁹ Sutherland, Daniel E. "Guerrillas: The Real War in Arkansas". *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (Autumn, 1993), pp. 257-285. Arkansas Historical Association. Accessed: 14-11-2019 19:29 UTC. Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40030851>

³⁰ Bradbury, John F. "Buckwheat Cake Philanthropy": Refugees and the Union Army in the Ozarks. *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 57, No. 3 (Autumn, 1998), pp. 233-254. Arkansas Historical Association Stable. Accessed: 14-11-2019 19:32 UTC: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40025882>

Arkansas society. Women farmed, traded, and protected the home in addition to continuing their more traditional domestic labor.³¹ Older men, too aged to contribute to the war effort, were left dependent on women and slaves for food. It was the women and the enslaved that kept the society knit together while the men were away. The women were the providers and protectors in the household. These new-found responsibilities were referenced more than once in wartime letters to family members. The increased reliance on slaves, however, was not referenced. Could this absence be caused by slaves fleeing to Union lines?

The diverse women of this state used food as a healing balm to the devastating effects of the War. Despite their differences, Arkansan women shared two common forms of labor: domestic labor and procreative reproduction. Domestic labor included washing, food production, and cooking. Class differences dictated the different tasks they performed at home. For example, the managerial tasks of a planter's wife differed widely from the forced work of an enslaved woman or the women of relatively poor yeomen households. Historic primary and secondary records provide muscular evidence that during the Civil War, all these Arkansan women, however varied, exercised their agency through *food power*.

Arkansas women in particular had the ability to alter their circumstances, even when resources were scarce, largely due to food power. This research provides an analysis of these hard-working Arkansans and brings to light food history in times of war and peace, plenty and scarcity, and life-long connections originating around food.

³¹ Howard, Rebecca A. "No Country for Old Men: Patriarchs, Slaves, and Guerrilla War in Northwest Arkansas". *The Arkansas Historical Quarterly*, Vol. 75, No. 4 (Winter 2016), pp. 336-354. Arkansas Historical Association. Accessed: 14-11-2019 19:33 UTC: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26281726>

Without the added contribution of slave labor, the non-slaveholding McCurdy women of Fayetteville acted with food power to adapt to household changes during the war. The diary of Mary Jane McCurdy Collins Weaver, born in 1855, records,

There was a smoke house where we cured our bacon and put up our hog meat; we also used it for a general storeroom. Before Pa left, he got one of my mother's sisters to stay with us until we moved to Grandpa's. At the beginning of the war we had plenty to eat. Ma and Aunt Mag raised the garden, and vegetables was [sic] plentiful; then too, we had a good supply of meat in the smoke house.³²

Isn't it curious that Weaver's father, James Donnell McCurdy, solicited a woman, his sister-in-law Mag, six years Mary's junior,³³ to come and work with them? This entry suggests that in this household men, women, and children knew the power found in female cooperation in food preparation—a form of food power.

- 1) An event occurred: James departed from his wife and children for a time;
- 2) which lead to a belief: James believed his family should be supported in his absence;
- 3) which lead to an impression: James requested his sister-in-law, Aunt Mag, to be the deputy food laborer;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: Aunt Mag managed the family garden;
- 5) which ended with an desired outcome: the family thrived in Father's absence.

Weaver recalled the horror of watching her mother, Judith Ann Kifer, grieve the absence of her father. The women sat at home listening to the guns and cannons of what is believed to be the battle of Prairie Groves fought on December 7, 1862. The battle resulted in a tactical stalemate that essentially guaranteed Union control in Northwest Arkansas.

For two days, Mary and her mother sat at home listening to the battle. One can well imagine the feelings of worry, powerlessness, and grief, not knowing if your husband and father

³² "Unbroken Circle", UArk-Fayetteville, (transcribed oral history) born 1855

³³ Year: 1860; Census Place: Prairie, Washington, Arkansas; Roll: M653_52; Page: 673; Family History Library Film: 803052. Accessed 5 March 2020.
https://www.ancestry.com/interactive/7667/4211311_00199/13382778?backurl=https://www.ancestry.com/family-tree/person/tree/160045514/person/102169662007/facts/citation/502241388649/edit/record

lived or died on the battlefield. What vehicle brought these powerless women the information they craved? Food exchange. They took action and baked “all the pies and cookies they could carry.” Weaver recalled,

When the guns stopped firing, [the McCurdy women] gathered up the horses and carried all the food they could to the battle ground... Now when they got there, the wounded was laying over the ground. You could see them propped up against trees and some of them just sprawled out on the ground. Of course Pa was the first person Ma was alookin’ for. She hunted all over the ground and asked everybody she met if they had seen Pa. Nobody had, and when she was about ready to give up, she heard he had been seen just a little while before. I think that was the happiest meeting they had during the war, because she had thought he was dead.

The women went to the wounded; they were the ones to be fed as long as the food lasted. Each one was given a piece of pie and a handful of cookies. When the food run short Ma said she seen lots of the soldiers divide with those who hadn’t got any. After they were fed, I think Ma got to talk with Pa only a little bit, but she come home happy, knowing that he had been spared.

By carrying pieces of pies and handfuls of cookies to the dying and the wounded, Weaver and her mother gained valuable information and enabled them to help in the war effort at a time when women’s military roles were quite limited. Weaver does not indicate whether the wounded were Confederate or Union.

- 1) An event occurred: Weaver and her mother listened to the battle of Prairie Grove for days;
- 2) which lead to a belief: Weaver and her mother believed they should know if their husband and father is alive;
- 3) which lead to an impression: Weaver’s mother believed she should be the one to act as an agent to gain that information;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: the women baked cookies and pies and carried them to the wounded on the battlefield;
- 5) which ended with a desirable outcome: by ministering to the wounded on the field, Weaver’s mother discovered the missing information.

In addition to engaging in food power on the battlefield, the McCurdy women treasured their kitchen tools. Of all the possessions her folks held onto in their move from Arkansas to

Texas, they valued a frying pan and a skillet. Weaver remembered, “When our folks got to Texas, I don’t think they had a thing in the world but a frying pan and a skillet. A skillet, you know, that was what they baked bread in.”

Generations later, Weaver continued to treasure a kitchen tool that symbolized food power. Weaver recalled a girl near her age gifting her a little chicken that Weaver would raise to a beautiful hen. When Weaver’s family moved, she traded the hen for a rolling pin since the family was not planning on taking any chickens. At the time of the interview with Weaver, that same dark walnut wooden rolling pin still hung on her kitchen wall. About the rolling pin she says, “All my children want it. I don’t know what I’m goin’ to do with it; I can’t afford to cut it up and divide it. It was old and had been used a lots when I got it and I have had it for seventy five years. After I had used it about seventy four year, it commenced to show some wear and my son, Lon, sandpapered it down for me and it is as good as new now.”

What treasure did Weaver prize highly and regard as an invaluable heirloom? A rolling pin. Weaver craved connection to loved ones in food preparation, on the battlefield, in moving the family to Texas, and in leaving a legacy for her children. What provides this connection? Food power.

The Southern slave-owning culture was dealt a major blow due to a loss of food power among female slaveholders during the war. Forty-seven-year-old Mary Frances Sale Edmonson, a slaveholder, commenced her diary on August 26, 1863, in Helena, Phillips County, Arkansas. She wrote, “This old book, which has power to recall to me faces that were familiar more than twenty years ago, and scenes that have occurred in North Alabama, Mobile, Mississippi,

Louisiana...I now devote as a sort of journal, in my desolated Arkansas Home, beginning far down in the second year of the cruel war waged against us.”³⁴

According to Edmonson, the balance of the Civil War hinged on who had the most salt. She lamented the loss of it and fervently prayed that she would not have to cave in to her Northern enemy for want of it. She wrote of the dread that accompanied their need for basic necessities. She grieved that their needs might compel them to “take the oath of allegiance to the Lincoln government.” All of the community’s efforts to acquire salt had failed. Salt was so important due to the rampant need to cure hog meat. Without the ability to cure pork—an Arkansas mainstay—a family could starve.³⁵

In December of 1863 Arkansas experienced a severe lack of food and an increase in the number of men away from home. During Christmas of that year, in one moment Edmonson felt empowered by her ability to fill the children’s stockings with care. The next moment she felt compassion at the realization of who was *not* seated at the dinner table of her friend, Mrs. Robinson.³⁶ She records, “The previous Christmas she, Mrs. R had around her table 7 or 8 young people at dinner, her husband and brother also; now, of that company four were dead in the bloom of youth our darling daughter Mary, Mrs. R’s sister Bettie, Mr. R’s Cousin, Mr. Prewett, and a soldier named Suggs.”

³⁴ “Mrs. Albert G Edmonson Diary”, Arkansas State Archive, SMC 4.6 (microfilm, transcribed into family papers), August 26, 1863-1865, Arkansas, Plantation Class.

³⁵ Weaver wrote, “I do not yet think I can take an oath to save us from starvation...All our efforts to procure salt have failed thus far--Our hogs are eating up our small supply of corn fast. What shall we do? We were almost overcome by the apparent necessity of our case, and went so far as to make out our bills and prepare to go to town last night. I [lift] my heart to God in prayer for direction begging him to save us from sin, and if under the circumstances with our feelings and sentiments to take the oath of allegiance to the Lincoln government he would help us to see it, and open a way for us to get what seemed to us absolutely needful in salt...yet, we know not but it may be in God’s power to humble us still [farther] in the dust.” (17, 18)

³⁶ Edmonson recorded, “Christmas day, the children were made happy by having their stockings filled last night in a manner mysterious to them--although Albert suspected that the bountiful...“Kriss Knight” lived at home with us--but Lou’s faith was entire--Henry, the [only] negro child on the place, was equally happy...Carrie has gone to Mrs. Robinsons to spend the Monday of Christmas with them--who have had like bereavements with ourselves.”

- 1) An event occurred: Christmas dinner at the Robinson home;
- 2) which lead to a belief: the more people present, the more powerful the meal;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: Mrs. Robinson invited extended family and friends to the table;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: dinner at the table;
- 5) which, lastly, presented an undesirable outcome: of the seven or eight young people at the 1862 Christmas dinner, four were now dead.

A consistent loss of food power debilitated Confederate women at home. Edmonson craved food security in a time of war. She knew the power of large gatherings at Christmas celebrations. By witnessing the drastic drop in the number of young people around the Robinson dinner table, Edmonson experienced a decisive blow to her community. Arkansas slaves—popularly considered as black family members by the slaveholding white population—fled slavery when the Union army was near, revealing what the ex-slaves valued more than their white family members: freedom. Edmonson’s entries reinforce a sense of powerlessness when certain foods, like tools, are unavailable; powerlessness at the inevitability of the loss of a war and the loss of black family members; and powerlessness when the number at the Christmas dinner table diminishes. Clearly, a growing *lack* of food power in Confederate households influenced the course of the war as more and more women pined for their men to be at home and not at war.

The power of food in individual battles can also be found in historical society records. The Benton County Historical commission recorded a clever food power incident at the battle of Pea Ridge on March 7 – 8, 1862. This major battle of the Civil War took place northeast of Fayetteville, Arkansas. The Union Brigadier General Samuel R. Curtis drove Confederate soldiers into Northwest Arkansas by moving south from central Missouri. Confederate Major General Earl Van Dorn counter-attacked trying to recapture northern Arkansas and Missouri. Curtis stopped the Confederate attack. By the second day Van Dorn’s soldiers were driven out.

Van Dorn's Confederate army outnumbered Curtis's. This Confederate defeat secured Federal control with Union soldiers in most of Missouri and northern Arkansas. Mary Elizabeth Wardlow's home rested directly in the path of Union soldiers. After the Feds gathered up all of Wardlow's chickens, they demanded she cook them to feed the Union soldiers. Staunchly Confederate Wardlow *did* cook them. "Feathers, entrails, and all." This form of rebellion against the North could only come through food power.

- 1) An event occurred: Union soldiers marched onto Wardlow's property;
- 2) which lead to a belief: Union soldiers believed Wardlow should cook her chickens for dinner;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: Soldiers gathered the hens for consumption;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: Wardlow cooked literally the entire chicken;
- 5) which, lastly, presented a desirable outcome: Union soldiers were met with an unpalatable meal.

Wardlow took advantage of this situation as the presumptive female cook. She defied orders from Union soldiers. She resisted the invading army by using her food power.

Black food history surrounding slaves, soldiers, and freedmen during the Civil War has only recently been brought to light. Historians were denied the black perspective on slavery before the 1930s. As the Depression spread, New Deal programs grew to include previously overlooked workers to provide relief in the form of government employment. One such group comprised artists and writers. The 1935 Works Progress Administration's Federal Writers' Project responded boldly by employing writers to interview as many former slaves as possible in order to record such a unique generation of witnesses. America's understanding of slavery would transform as crucial evidence surrounding agricultural practices, slave life, the Civil War, Reconstruction, and oral history became available.

One enslaved woman took the initiative to use food—or food power—to empower not only herself, but her family and community. Historian Donald McNeilly drew from ex-slave

interviews when he wrote, “Israel Johnson recalled his mother’s efforts to supplement...with possum, an errand of hunting strictly forbidden by the master. When the master caught her with the illicit quarry, he confiscated the opossum. Undaunted, she continued her nightly hunts, now burying the quarry until it was safe to prepare.”³⁷

- 1) An event: the Johnson family lacked a healthful diet;
- 2) leads to a belief: Israel Johnson’s mother believes the slave community should be fed;
- 3) which leads to an impression: she herself has the hunting skills to fulfill that need;
- 4) which leads to food exchange: she catches a possum, gets caught, learns a lesson, returns to her nightly hunt and buries the prize;
- 5) which ends with an outcome: the diet of the slaves is supplemented with needful protein.

Women living near ensuing battles saw the need to support their troops with food power.

WPA Interviewer Sheldon F. Gauthier interviewed ex-slave Henry H. Buttler on the subject.

Buttler was eighty-seven at the time of the interview. Gauthier reports, “a venerable graduate of Washburn College in Topeka, Kansas and ex-school teacher of the Sherman and Fort Worth, Texas Colored school systems.” The reader can decipher from just these few sentences alone that this narrative is different from many slave narratives. The grammar indicates education, respect, and a willingness by the interviewer to report the exact words of the former slave; unlike other narratives in which the freedman’s words were paraphrased or rendered in dialect. Both Civil War records and the WPA slave narratives corroborate that Buttler fought in the Civil War on the side of the Union. The battle of Pine Bluff took place on October 25, 1863, in Jefferson County, Arkansas, near the county courthouse. The U.S. garrison, commanded by Col. Powell Clayton,

³⁷ McNeilly, Donald P. *The Old South Frontier: Cotton Plantations and the Formation of Arkansas Society, 1819-1861*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2000.

successfully safeguarded the town against raids led by Confederate Brig. Gen. John S. Marmaduke. The Union victory guaranteed the security of the garrison until the end of the war.

Concerning the battle, Buttler remembered a bitter Sunday morning in November of 1864. Both armies fought energetically until the fatigue of war set in. Buttler recalled:

When it seemed to be a hopeless struggle there appeared on the field a large number of women who had organized themselves into squads. They were carrying small platforms, two to a platform, upon which was coffee, sandwiches, and other eatibles. These women went among the men, feeding the soldiers the food and at the same time, they kept up a constant encouraging talk, as follows, 'Stand up to them men. Be real men. Be whole men. Don't give up. Fight them. Men. We are behind you. Show your stuff. Fight them to the last man, you have them whipped just stay in there and fight just a little longer.' Those women kept us fighting on into the night and then the Confederates began to give ground. Which continued into a general retreat. They had no sandwich squad. If anyone should ask you who won the battle of Pine Bluff, tell them that Henry Buttler said that it was the women's sandwich squad that joined the union forces armed with food and encouraging words.

Buttler does not indicate whether the women were black slave women or women of European descent. By walking two by two and carrying coffee and sandwiches, these women delivered an influential blow against the Confederacy by exercising their agency through food power—at a time when women's roles in the military were very limited.

- 1) An event occurred: the battle of Pine Bluff;
- 2) which lead to a belief: women believed Union troops needed both a morale booster and increased food supplies;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: these women organized themselves into squads and produced sandwiches and coffee;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: the women distributed both food and words of encouragement to the Union soldiers;
- 5) which, lastly, presented a desirable outcome: strengthened soldiers won the battle.

As previously mentioned, a loss of food power can be a more powerful influence than a gain of food power. Reporter E. Jean Foote conducted an interview with former slave Belle Williams. Williams was eighty-seven at the time of the interview. She was born into slavery in

1850 or 1851. Williams defended her enslaver as a “good massa” due to the fact that he never whipped or sold his slaves. The integrity of many of these narratives is often called into question as the ultimate audience were largely white women. Thus, scenes of violent rapes or violent discipline at the hands of slave owners may have been tempered and edited to not offend the resulting audience.³⁸

Williams recollects an event immediately following emancipation. Her mother, Elizabeth Hulsie, had taken the name of the slave owner Sid Hulsie, whose plantation was located in Carroll County, Arkansas. Hulsie, Hulsie’s brother, and other slaves resided in an emancipation camp. Foote recorded,

The first night we was [sic] in camp, my mammy got to thinking about Mother Hulsie [the female slave owner] and how she was left all alone with all the work, and not a soul to help her. The blue coats had gone through the house and upset everything, so in the morning she asked the captain if she could ask just one thing of him, and that was that she and my uncle go back to Mother Hulsie just for the day, and help put everything away and do the washing. The captain said they could go, but they must be back by five o’clock and not one n---r child could go along, so they went back for the day and mammy did all the washing, every rag that she could find, and my uncle chopped and stacked outside the house, all the wood that he could chop that day, and then they came back to camp. My mammy said she’d never forget Mother Hulsie wringing her hands and crying, ‘Oh Lawd, what will I do,’ as they went down the lane.

In this case of food power, it is the loss of power rather than the gain that is so impactful. While food labor is not directly described in the narrative, it can be inferred that part of the domestic labor assigned to Elizabeth Hulsie was food related.

- 1) An event occurred: Emancipation;
- 2) which lead to a belief: the freed men and women believed white mistress of the plantation would be unable to care for herself;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: the former slaves returned to the white mistress;

³⁸ Lankford, George E. *Bearing Witness: Memories of Arkansas Slavery Narratives from the 1930s WPA*, pp. 50, 56-57, 190-194. Fayetteville, University of Arkansas Press, 2003.

- 4) which lead to food exchange: they contributed inside and outside the home with domestic labor;
- 5) which, lastly, presented a desirable outcome: they left the plantation a second time, knowing they had ministered to a powerless enslaver.

When Elizabeth Hulsie and her brother left the plantation, the slave mistress, “Mother Hulsie,” experienced extreme deprivation at her loss of food power. The skills surrounding food were found in the slave woman, not the slave mistress. The wringing of the hands is evidence of the magnitude of the loss. It is interesting to note that while the freed slaves did take the time, the energy, and the risk to return to minister to the former slave owners, they did ultimately *leave* to return to the emancipation camp. The freed slaves took their prized food power with them.

In conclusion, the accumulation of seemingly small and simple accomplishments by women seriously affected the results of the Civil War. Women’s consistent choices to act on their moral rectitude changed their circumstances. A series of blatant resistance to the status quo created the ultimate loss of the War for the Confederacy. These seemingly minor events changed the course of the entire war and the history of the United States of America.

Chapter 3: Gilded Aprons, 1890-1891

The rural women of Arkansas in the early 1890s exercised food power in order to find a reprieve from the darker social problems of the Gilded Age. From 1861 to 1891, food power evolved from a robust plan of action in the Civil War to a thin, gold paint covering a careworn, tattered apron of domestic labor in food. As Arkansas continued its painfully slow recovery from the devastation of the War, domestic landscapes transformed into small factories of the “eggs-and-milk-cash” industry. Rural women relied on household garden plots and gathering eggs to facilitate trade with other women for their needs and an occasional luxury. These microeconomies empowered rural women to improve their circumstances, even when times were difficult or lonely. This yearning for improvement was also reflected in the 1890s genesis of women’s societies inside and outside of church: Women’s Christian Temperance Union, The Grand Chapter Order of the Eastern Star of the State of Arkansas, Kings’ Daughters, Ladies of the Maccabees, Pyhian Sisters, the Mosaic Templars of America, Daughters of the American Revolution, and United Daughters of the Confederacy.³⁹ This latter group’s devotion to the Southern way of life led to the popular perception that racial tension seized the day and divided communities during this era. Primary evidence, however, might sway historians toward a more civil discord between races in the early days of the Progressive Era. Food power acted as a vehicle to strengthen family and female bonds, regardless of race.

Events recorded in the *Nannie Stillwell Jackson Diary* demonstrate persuasive evidence for food power in race relations among women.⁴⁰ The diary takes place in 1890 and 1891 in Watson, Desha County, Arkansas, a part of the Delta. This valuable piece of history was discovered in 1978 and published in 1982 by University of Arkansas Professor Margaret

³⁹ Wayne, Jeannie. *Arkansas: A Narrative History*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 2002.

⁴⁰ “Nannie Stillwell Jackson’s Diary”, UArk-Fayetteville, born 1854, MC 460

Bolsterli, an expert on Arkansas diaries and Desha County. She titled the published work *Vinegar Pie and Chicken Bread: A Woman's Diary of Life in the Rural South, 1890-91*. Among several virtues of this book, one stands above the rest: food power and race relations.

Dr. Bolsterli asserts in her introduction:⁴¹

By consulting census rolls in 1880 and 1900, it is possible to determine which of Mrs. Jackson's acquaintances were black and which were white. Readers unacquainted with the ways of the rural South of that time may be surprised to find how much communication there was between the races. Mrs. Jackson expresses friendly and affectionate feelings for a large number of blacks, and judging from their gifts and visits during her confinement, the affection was returned. She...trades poultry and dairy products with them...and in the process of these transactions does a great deal of "visiting."

Nannie Stillwell Jackson writes,

Wednesday, August 6, 1890...I cut and made one of the aprons for Aunt Francis' grand child & Lizzie & I partly made the basque Aunt Chaney came & washed the dinner dishes...Aunt Jane Osburn was here...& Aunt Mary Williams she brought me a nice mess of squashes for dinner, Caroline Coalman is sick & sent Rosa to me to send her a piece of beef I sent her bucket full of cold vituals...got no letters to day wrote one for Aunt Francis to her mother & she took it to the post office, I gave her 50 cents for the 2 chickens she brought & a peck of meal for the dozen eggs...

We learn from Dr. Bolsterli's research that Aunt Mary Williams, Aunt Jane Osburn, Aunt Francis Hines, Caroline Coalman, Rosa, and Aunt Chaney are all black. At the time, the Arkansas society code dictated black and white forms of address. The titles of *Mr.* or *Mrs.* were reserved only for whites. Blacks who commanded respect because of age could be called *uncle* or *aunt*. Other blacks were to be called by their first names alone. Lonely Nannie Stillwell Jackson found much-needed female interaction through food exchange. Her black friends and associates shared that need and satisfied it via strong bonds and food power.

⁴¹ Bolsterli, Margaret. *Vinegar Pie and Chicken Bread: Woman's Diary of Life in the Rural South, 1890-1891*. Fayetteville: University of Arkansas Press, 1982.

Dr. Bolsterli's analysis persuades historians to consider the role food power plays, not only as a race analysis, but also in all-black families, churches, and communities. Historian Rhae Lynn Barnes taught that among slave communities, newcomers were not accepted until they had substantially contributed by way of food sharing to the slave community. There existed a strong correlation between the value of enslaved men to the community and the ability to hunt for food contributions. These discoveries open the door for future research in race relations and food power.

Rural Arkansas women viewed rituals surrounding food as meaningful symbols for healing after childbirth, improving marriages, and strengthening bonds of female friendship. *The Diary of Sarah Rhodes* demonstrates these examples of food power.⁴² Born December 30, 1848, in Port Jervis, N.Y. Sarah married Cory Rhodes, six years her senior, on October 20, 1866. The diary indicates that by 1890 Cory was engaged in Sunday School work. The 1880 census lists him as a farmer and the 1900 census lists him as a "missionary TSU."⁴³ At the time of the diary, the family lived in Clarksville, Arkansas. Unlike other diaries that have been copied or edited by family members, Rhodes's two diaries show her original handwriting. Each pre-dated page measures approximately three by six inches and covers the years 1890-1891. Imagine a three-by-five card for each day of your life. What would you write? The pages are small, so her written words are limited. However, there seems to be much to read between the lines. As it is literally a daily diary, we see the ups and downs of food power.

⁴² "Sarah Rhodes Diary", Arkansas State Archive, SMC 14.16 (microfilm) and MS 796 (two original diaries, book format, approx 3x6 inches, pre-dated) 1890-1891, Arkansas, New York native raising children in South.

⁴³ Researching the Gilded Age can be complicated since the majority of 1890 U.S. Census records were burned in the 1921 Commerce Department Building fire. Reliance on 1880 and 1900 U.S. Census records becomes all the more paramount.

Year: 1900; Census Place: Clarksville, Johnson, Arkansas; Page: 9; Enumeration District: 0045; FHL microfilm: 1240064.

Year: 1880; Census Place: Fourche, Pulaski, Arkansas; Roll: 55; Page: 488B; Enumeration District: 153.

Her Wednesday, January 1, 1890, entry quoted Mrs. H.R. Brown⁴⁴,

“Look forward, & not back”
The travelled track
Bears many a footstep thou
Wouldst fain retrace.
Press onward to the goal,
The homeland of the soul,
And leave the wayward Feast for God’s hand to efface.”

She followed the quote with scripture:

“Commit thy way unto
The Lord and He will direct thy paths
Bible”

It is interesting that Rhodes attributes her scripture simply to “Bible” because she wrote the scripture incorrectly. She combined Psalm 37:5—“*Commit thy way unto the Lord*; trust also in him; and he shall bring it to pass”—with Proverbs 3:6—“In all thy ways acknowledge him, and *he shall direct thy paths*.” Perhaps she knew the Bible did not say exactly those words. Still, those words were somewhere in the good book. Regardless, these scriptures clearly resonated with her.

The dinner table represented cohesion not only for the family but also for bodily healing after the trauma of childbirth. On Thursday, January 9, 1890, Sarah Jane Hazen Rhodes began her first diary entry, “Frances is three weeks old today, I went to the table for dinner for the first time.” This, Rhodes’s first daily entry, centers on her presence at the dinner table. It also tells the reader 1) that Rhodes’s childbirth on December 10, 1889 with little Frances was quite traumatic for the forty-one-year-old mother; 2) that she associated recovery with the ability to sit at the

⁴⁴ Johnson county biographies have been digitized. Researching the “Brown” family entries might provide more information about “Mrs. H.R. Brown.”
<http://www.mygenealogyhound.com/arkansas-biographies/ar-johnson-county-biographies/j-r-brown-genealogy-johnson-county-arkansas-coal-hill-ar.html>

dinner table; and 3) she had hope and determination for the future as she started a new diary. The food power formula resonates here with postpartum Rhodes.

- 1) An event occurred: Rhodes gave birth to Frances;
- 2) which lead to a belief: after she recovers she should return to the dinner table;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: after three weeks she felt well enough to return;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: Rhodes sat at the dinner table;
- 5) which presented a desirable outcome: she now rested at the table and started a hopeful return to normalcy in the household as she started her new diary.

Rhodes's entries do *not* tell the reader about the tragic losses of her older children--which poignantly highlights this watershed moment at the dining table. These details must be uncovered by genealogical and census records: Arthur Melville Rhodes (1871-1873)⁴⁵, Claude Merton Rhodes (1874-1880), Mary Lucinda Rhodes (1877-1878)⁴⁶, and Ada Dell Rhodes (1883-1883).⁴⁷ Sarah Rhodes was no stranger to grief. Now, her four-year-old son Milton, born in 1886, and newborn Frances made two mouths to feed. Is it any wonder why she begins her diary with the words, "Look forward and not back."

Rhodes's diary also exemplifies the power of food in marriage. In the first five months of her daily entries, January through May of 1890, in all of her passages, over the duration of 120 days, only two phrases did she underline. The first underline is found on February 22, 1890.

⁴⁵ U.S., Find A Grave Index, 1600s-Current. Ancestry.com. Ancestry.com Operations, Inc. 2012. Provo, UT, USA.

⁴⁶ The following details for Rhodes's first daughter Mary Lucinda are found from the genealogical website "Find A Grave Index" in association with "Ancestry.com": Name, Mary Lucinda Rhodes; Birth Date, 4 Jun 1877; Death Date, 31 Aug 1878; Cemetery, Martin Cemetery; Burial or Cremation Place, Little Rock, Pulaski County, Arkansas, United States of America; Has Bio? Yes. We learn from this record that the family was living in Little Rock at this time.

⁴⁷ "Find A Grave" and "Ancestry.com" provide these facts associated with the citation regarding the infant's grave, "Ada Dell Rhodes, Birth: 24 Apr 1883, Clarksville, Arkansas; Death: 24 Apr 1883; Burial: Clarksville, Johnson County, Arkansas, United States of America.

Previous to that day, Rhodes had recorded dozens of incidents of how and where she set the hens. Then, she recorded, “Cory sot [sic] a hen. The old blue hen up in the barn.”

She underlined the word “sot.” Apparently, having her husband’s help in domestic labor with food had enough significance for her to not only mention it, but to emphasize this act of endearment. A kind gesture from a husband to his postpartum wife.

- 1) An event occurred: Rhodes set the hens dozens of times from January 9, 1890 to February 21, 1890;
- 2) which lead to a belief: a wife should set the hens as needed;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: perhaps a husband could set a hen occasionally;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: Cory set the hen;
- 5) which, lastly, presented a desirable outcome: a kind husband helped a postpartum wife.

Was Rhodes smiling as she wrote the words, “Cory sot a hen?” It appears that this seemingly small act by her husband put her into good humor for the duration of the diary’s entry. She follows this pointed sentence with a series of good news: “We weighed baby today & he weighed 14 ¾ pounds. Cory tacking...for paper. Miltie is better. Cory went to Presbyterian dinner and brought dinner for us all.” The entry began with her husband helping her with domestic food labor. Her new infant thrived weighing over fourteen pounds at just over two months old. Her husband’s paper business prospered. Her four-year-old son’s health was on the mend. And Rhodes did not have to make dinner. Her husband brought dinner home. Only good feelings exude from this diary entry, largely due to food power.

Food acted as a forceful tie in bringing women together in companionship and camaraderie. Rhodes’s second underline is found on Thursday, April 24, 1890. She wrote, “Aunt Lucretia McKennon called awhile. I love her.”

Aunt Lucretia visited between a breakfast with Brother Koontz and a dinner after churning butter. Rhodes ended her happy entry with the proud news: “Took off a hen with 14 chicks.” The following entry shows a dreary scene, “Rainy day.”

Considering Dr. Bolsterli’s assertions regarding Southern society’s codes, could Aunt Lucretia be black? If she was black, what does this say about race relations? The 1880 U.S. census listed Lucretia McKennon as a fifty-seven-year-old white widow living in Sparta.⁴⁸ Ten years later, a sage sixty-seven-year-old matriarchal figure might be just what the doctor ordered. Rhodes had lost her father, Daniel Corwin Hazen of New York, just three months previous on January 14, 1890. Having a motherly visit might have helped heal her grieving heart. A native New Yorker, perhaps Rhodes did not know the South’s code for black versus white nomenclature. Perhaps in New York, the title of *aunt* was reserved for only the dearest of white associations.

- 1) An event occurred: Rhodes’s father passed away in January 1890;
- 2) which lead to a belief: Rhodes grieved her father’s passing immensely;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: a visit from a matriarchal figure might help;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: Aunt Lucretia McKennon visits between breakfast and dinner;
- 5) which, lastly, presented a desirable outcome: Rhodes’s mood was lighter and she was more apt to count her fourteen chicks a success.

White families relied heavily on the black labor force giving African Americans a heavy dose of food power. Rhodes frequently mentions “Josie” in her entries. Could this be twenty-two-year-old African-American Josie Calhoun?⁴⁹ If so, what does the diary tell us about the black and white relations in this household? The entries from January to May 1890 are particularly intriguing:

⁴⁸ Year: 1880; Census Place: *Spadra, Johnson, Arkansas*; Roll: 48; Page: 309B; Enumeration District: 092.

⁴⁹ Year: 1880; Census Place: *Prairie, Johnson, Arkansas*; Roll: 48; Page: 351C; Enumeration District: 093

January 11. Josie baked bread and did the usual work. February 9. Cory went to the country, Josie to S.S. & church., All home to dinner. March 24. Josie came & John with her, she brought me a mess of greens. April 24. Josie washed calico clothes, I churned, got dinner, &c. April 29. Lovely day. Josie went home. May 2. Prof. Smith sent note, unavoidably detained till tomorrow &c Josie ironed. May 3. Prof. Smith took dinner with us. Mr. Evans worked. May Stone came & she & Josie went to Town & each got a pair of shoes. May 4. Josie had one of her sp-sp-sp-, spells this morning.”

Rhodes depended on Josie. The May 4th entry is particularly intriguing. One common form of resistance by blacks to white supremacy was pretending to be ill. This age-old tactic had been used for centuries during slavery. On May 3, Josie “went to town” with May Stone. Did Josie see someone in particular in town on May 3? If so, did they persuade her to an event the next day? If so, did she pretend to have a spell on May 4 to get out of work and leave early? Is Sarah mocking Josie when she writes “sp-sp-sp-spell”? Further study of the diaries’ entries might reveal more about Rhodes’s reliance on Josie in domestic labor.

Food power resonates throughout *The Sarah Rhodes Diaries*. Similar to Mary Jane McCurdy Collins Weaver during the Civil War, when Rhodes discovered her need for wool, she met her needs by using eggs as a form of cash to trade with other women. Rhodes needed to return to normalcy after childbirth; she needed help setting the hens during postpartum; and she needed another woman’s friendship in a time of need. How did she answer these needs? Food power.

By 1900, three of the four family members in the Rhodes household would be dead.⁵⁰ Four-year-old Milton would pass away in 1893. Infant Frances would be dead by March 20, 1896. Sarah Rhodes would follow Frances only thirteen days later on April 2, 1896. Rhodes’s widower Cory would remarry Elizabeth Mercy Reeves in 1898 and begin a new family. Without

⁵⁰ Year: 1900; Census Place: Clarksville, Johnson, Arkansas; Page: 9; Enumeration District: 0045; FHL microfilm: 1240064

this treasured diary, we might only know Sarah Rhodes as the deceased first wife of a Union soldier and missionary. Now, we see patterns of food power weaving in and out of the pages, tying family and community relationships even tighter during a trying time in the state of Arkansas.

Not all Gilded-era Arkansas women saw dinner at the kitchen table as empowering or positive. Sarah Stillwell Huffman, known as Sallie to her family, was born in Little Rock, Arkansas on December 27, 1863.⁵¹ Huffman's father, Joseph Stillwell IV, was a living history of Arkansas. Born in 1826 at the Arkansas Post, by 1860 he was a slave owner and attorney at law.⁵² He passed away in 1870 from pneumonia, over twenty years before the diary begins. The Arkansas State Archives houses Huffman's diary along with colorful pictures from the local newspaper pasted into an antique, large scrapbook in poor condition. Huffman started her diary January 1, 1891. Most of the journals from this period begin in January as part of a New Year. At the beginning of the diary, we find Huffman living as a twenty-seven-year-old single woman with her mother, Mary.⁵³ Huffman's first reference to food exchange is on April the 17th. She writes, "Lloyd goes with me every evening to gather up the eggs. He is a great talker and his one favorite theme is my Big Buddie done [sic]." Apparently, single Sallie sees food exchange as an opportunity for socializing. On April the 19th Huffman laments, "Miss Sarah concluded to spend

⁵¹ Huffman, Sarah Stillwell Papers, Arkansas State Archives, MS104, Little Rock, Arkansas.

⁵² "United States Census, 1860," database with images, *Ancestry.com*, Joseph Stillwell, Little Rock, Pulaski, Arkansas; Page: 51; Family History Library Film: 803049; *Arkansas, Compiled Census and Census Substitutes Index, 1819-1870* [database on-line]. Slave schedule. P. 232. Provo, UT, USA: Ancestry.com Operations Inc, 1999; The 1860 slave schedule shows that as of June 6, 1860, Joseph Stillwell owned a twenty-year-old mulatto woman, a nine-year-old black boy, a seven-year-old black boy, and a seventy-year-old black woman in Little Rock, Arkansas.

⁵³ "United States Census, 1870," database with images, *Ancestry.com*, Mary Stillwell, Bayou Meto, Arkansas, Arkansas; Roll: M593_47; Page: 13A; Family History Library Film: 545546. Diaries from this period are particularly helpful since the 1890 census was destroyed by fire. As surrogates, we piece together Sallie's home life using the 1870 census and the 1900 census. In 1870, Sallie lived with her widowed, farming mother, Mary Boswell Stillwell and four siblings, all under the age of sixteen; "United States Census, 1900," database with images, *Ancestry.com*, Abner Huffman, McFall, Arkansas, Arkansas; Page: 13; Enumeration District: 0005; FHL microfilm: 1240049.

the night with us but went home directly after dinner.” Then, on May the 7th, she vents, “I went down to see Miss Rene & Manda this evening. I think I would like Miss Rene very much if I was better acquainted with her. We had a very nice time playing croquet. Laura & Cousin Ada had gone to see Aunt Syntia. We young folks were invited down to Mary’s to eat strawberries this eve at 4 oclock but I could not go on account of so many cows to milk. Miss Sarah spent this evenin with Ma. I was very glad she came for it gave me a better chance to go visiting.” As one of the last children at home still with her mother, it seems she feels the responsibility greatly of being with her. Eating around the dinner table seems more confining versus the opportunity to eat away from the dinner table with friends. At twenty-seven she still see herself as a “young folk.” Dining away from home would be attractive for a social young single woman. On May the 16th she vents again, “We had...invitation to a fish fry today but did not get to go, too buisy [sic] planting cotton. I have baked light bread, milked twice & churned today besides house cleaning & I am as tired as a work ox.” This almost-thirty-year-old would rather eat out than tend to the house it seems.

- 1) An event occurred: an invitation to a local fish fry
- 2) which lead to a belief: a single woman ought to be able to attend the event;
- 3) which lead to an impression to act: perhaps she could go;
- 4) which lead to food exchange: in place of a social fish fry, planting cotton, baking bread, milking cows, and churning butter are the events of the day;
- 5) which, lastly, presented an *undesirable* outcome: a single woman feels worked to death and unable to socialize as she would like.

Happily, this single woman, so sadly strapped to her mother’s side in 1891, ended up marrying Abner Huffman on August 18, 1892. By 1900, we find Huffman and husband Abner with two daughters of their own: Verna age six and Henrietta age four. It is unknown whether food exchange became a pleasant engagement for Huffman as a mother since the diary ends before her daughter’s birth.

Further historical analysis is necessary to flesh out the full impact of food power in Arkansas during the 1890s. This era in Arkansas offers a richness in historical research largely due to the popular practice of journaling. Civil rights attorney James Faust wrote, “Private choices are not private; they all have public consequences...Our society is the sum total of what millions of individuals do in their private lives. That sum total of private behavior has worldwide public consequences of enormous magnitude. There are no completely private choices.” In what ways did the private lives of these women shape this place and time?⁵⁴ While some historians might overlook these rural women’s written records as trivial, further investigation into society, politics, and economics during this era could provide fascinating insights into race relations, marital and familial relations, agricultural economics, and social mores surrounding food exchange.

⁵⁴ Faust, James E. “Will I Be Happy?” General Conference. April 1987. Salt Lake City: The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints.

Conclusion

Historians of the nineteenth century have utilized a wide variety of methodologies in order to research events in women's history and food history in the domestic sphere. Some historians have tried to attribute a dollar value to women's efforts at home. Is the value of women's domestic food labor quantifiable? I argue that primary evidence found in Arkansas archives proves that Arkansas women directly influenced historic events during the antebellum era, the Civil War, emancipation, and the Gilded Age. Some of the societal successes that transpired from Arkansas women engaging in food power are a refined standard of living, improved marital relations, motivated soldiers, and nurtured children. This use of food power made these women central to their families. Obviously these women were important to their communities. How might other women have played a similar role? Those who did not leave a written record?

Food power would persist in the era of modernization: the twentieth century. While men went off to fight in the two World Wars women went to work canning, storing, and rationing food supplies. During the Depression, Arkansas women would find ingenious ways to stretch their pennies, exchanging domestic labor for bags of beans for example.

Thanks to gendered roles, food power has always been a force. There are enough families in poverty that food power is still employed in the twenty-first century. During the Coronavirus Pandemic of 2020, even the wealthy--with their previously employed in-house cooks, nannies, drivers, etc.--are forced to become re-acquainted with the kitchen. The concept of gathering the family around the dinner table is more important now than ever as the world population is confined to the domestic sphere. What will food exchange look like in the next few weeks or months? Will there be long-term changes and effects from this outbreak? It will be interesting to

research the history of what the “unseen” population of families during COVID-19 are doing in the realm of food power.

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